

OLIVE OIL IN HISTORY AND RELIGION

The oil or olive tree (*Olea europaea* L., Oleaceae tribe of Oleinee), knotty and silver, is an evergreen tree between 5 and 8 meters high (sometimes up to 15), with a circumference that can reach 6. The flowers, white, fragrant flowers form inflorescence clusters that make their appearance towards April-May (the so-called 'mignolatura'). The fruits, oval drupes, first appear green, then red-violet and finally black. They are usually ripe between October and December and are used, depending on the variety, for pressing the oil, or for food.

The olive is considered the standard tree of the Mediterranean climate up to the point its cultivation has marked the borders of the northern and western area of the so-called "Mediterranean region", according to the phitographers. But the origins of this tree are much more remote. Fossils of spontaneous olive plants were found in the Mediterranean area: they were dated back to million of years ago, that is to say before man's appearance on earth.

It was an olive branch, brought into the beak of a dove, to announce Noah the end of flood, while Adam, close to death, received it directly from God. An Angel gave his son Seth three seeds generated by the "Tree of Good and Evil": before his father's burial: he was asked to put them between his lips. Thus three shrubs arose from his grave: cedar, cypress and olive trees. But the best-known legend of this kind is the contest between Athena and Poseidon. By decision of Zeus, the possession of the city of Athens and the Attica region, would be awarded to the God who would provide the most useful gift. In the end only Athena and Poseidon accepted the challenge. The latter emerged from the forest a wonderful horse, but Athena arose a new tree from the bowels of the earth: the olive tree. Zeus declared the goddess his daughter as the winner, claiming that the horse is the symbol of war while the olive is symbol of peace. But there are many more legends. Among them, we remember the one with Aristaeus, a nomadic shepherd, as protagonist: he was the first to get the oil by squeezing the olives, another tells how Latania gave birth to the twins Apollo and Diana under the branches of an olive tree, which then became an object of veneration. Finally, it is impossible not to mention the sacred olive trees from Olympia, the Serths used them to be crowned as winners of the Olympic Games.

In the following centuries the cultivation passed from the north of Egypt and Syria to the Greek islands, especially Cyprus, Rhodes, Crete, before moving to Greece and Asia. Even the Babylonian Code had regulated the trade of the olive oil for centuries and this activity was considered of great importance. The Egyptians considered it as a gift from their Gods, the Jews used it to "anoint" their king, the Phoenicians and Greeks built special ships for its transport. It seems that just the Greeks, who considered it as a gift of the Goddess Athena, introduced this plant into Italy. The Romans began to specialize in the storage and distribution of oil and streamline management of large amounts obtained from the subjected peoples. The oil was used for cosmetics, medicine and lighting, but his place of honour was already in the kitchen, recipes that are very similar to those of our present "Mediterranean diet". This is witnessed by the writings of the legendary Apicus, one of the first gastronome in history, that already in the first century after Christ made its ubiquitous oil recipes for preserving, seasoning, cook.

After a long period of decline, due to the fall the Roman Empire and the barbarian invasions, the olive tree that had survived in the monasteries, regained a prominent place in the twelfth century, when the oil came back as the protagonist of trade, contributing to the fortunes of different states. Puglia was transformed into a huge

olive grove and ran the economy of the southern lands. Nowadays, the '50s mainly marked the expansion in the rest of the world of the "culture" of oil, following the "discovery" of its unparalleled nourishing qualities.

IN HISTORY

Over the centuries man has used olive oil for many different uses: first as a medicine since the time of Galen, as a decoration and as a fuel source of energy and light, to honour heroes and dead and in trade as "valuable currency", in cosmetics, in the liturgy and the sacramental consecration of kings. Over the time, it has been considered a symbol of peace, wisdom, prosperity, wealth, strength, beauty, dignity, sacredness, of honour, of victory, to consecrate, of alliance between God and men, olive oil has therefore accompanied the history of man with his multitasking versatility.

Origins – the first evidence of the use of oil extracted from olives is dated back to the ancient Age of Copper, around 6000 years ago, when some people settled in the present area of Syria and Palestine, selected among the shrubs 'Oleastro' a wild olive tree with fleshy fruit: they used the oil extracted from it to protect the skin and as a fuel, as well as wood for construction.

The Phoenicians then, starting from the easternmost coast, exported oil in the Mediterranean, making it known to the Minoan civilization and the Egyptian people.

In ancient Egypt – The Egyptian population's use of the olive oil is specially linked to the cult of the dead: the Egyptians used it to decorate the monumental tombs of kings with crowns of olive branches and olive nuts, and anointed their bodies to mummify the dead: wealth and dignity were the meaning that you wanted to express with the symbol of the oil. Among the Egyptians it is possible for the first time to find another use for olive oil: the designation of people with compelling features: the pharaohs officially nominated the lieutenants by pouring olive oil on their heads.

In ancient Greece – a Greek myth expressed by Callimachus tells the creation of the olive tree by Pallas Athena: Zeus had promised the Region of Attica to the one who would bring the most useful gift: Poseidon made a spring gush sea water and gave him a horse, a symbol of military power and courage; the goddess of wisdom replied giving birth to the rock, the Acropolis was born around Athens, and considered sacred to the gods of the olive trees, so that the constitution of Solon punished with death those who had demolished one. In the 'Oedipus at Colonus' Sophocles called the olive tree "nourishment of our children", the Greeks used the olive oil as a remedy for skin care, cosmetics, body hygiene, and as a lubricant for "Lighting for ritual uses, and to assist the muscles in the gymnasium, and of course the main use, remained food: every Greek adult consumed about 30 gallons 'oil per year.

In the Roman civilization – also for the Roman population, the olive plant was linked to the legend behind the city under it in fact the wolf fed the twins Romulus and Remo, founders of the Eternal City. But the Romans were people primarily linked to the practical things, and mainly used the oil in trade, as precious "money", and often accepted payment of taxes in olive oil from their conquered

peoples. Not mere coincidence that the first coins minted in Croton, had an olive tree carved on. The cultivation of oil is spread in this way throughout the Mediterranean basin. The Romans finally prized the olive tree as a symbol of glory in the crown of the heroes and as a wish for prosperity in the wedding ornaments.

During the Middle Ages – With the decline of the Roman Empire also the use of olive oil underwent a downtrend due to the barbarians who needed space for grazing their flocks. The protection of olive trees was due especially to monasteries and religious institutions: the main use is in fact attested in these centuries in the liturgy, for the administration of the sacraments.

RELIGION

From its origins and from different religions the olive tree is considered sacred, and its worship is linked to myths about the origin of the world, we need only to recall the myth of the origin of the tree coming from the prayer made by Adam near death; about the Oil of Mercy born from the seeds placed in his mouth after the burial were born cedar, cypress and, indeed, the olive tree.

In the Jewish religion – In the Sacred Scriptures the olive tree and the olive oil that is derived from it are symbols of the covenant between God and mankind: the dove announcing Noah the end of the great flood, and thus the new era of reconciliation had an olive branch in its mouth. This symbolic value is expressed also in the consecration of the men called to mediate the relationship between the God of the Fathers and the people of Israel, both priests, in memory of the election of Aaron commanded by God to Moses (Exodus 40.13), as Kings, from gesture of Samuel and David over Saul (1 Samuel 10:1), and the prophets, like Elisha (1 Kings 19:16). Olive oil and the Jewish religion are still tied on the Feast of Hannukkà, which commemorates the triumph of the Jewish people on the Greek domination, a symbol of the victory of faith on Hellenism and his cult of reason. The ritual commemorates the miracle of the Holy Temple of Oil, which miraculously regenerated for 8 days-long.

Christianity – The Christian religion is already marked in his name by the use of olive oil in the consecration of kings, priests and prophets: Christos the Greek word meaning “anointed” and the Christ is indeed the Messiah anointed by the Lord, expected in Israel and sent to save the humankind. Therefore, the Church from the beginning marks the baptized with the Holy Chrism. “And olive oil is the constant symbol with which you impart the sacraments, the sign of the presence of God” with the oils blessed during the Chrism Mass of Holy Thursday are administered the sacraments of Confirmation, the priestly consecration and the Anointing of the sick. The use of the olive oil for the Christians comes from The New Testament where Christ prepared to his passion in the oil-grove of Gethsemane; the Samaritan poured oil ointment on the wounds of the man who was suffering . The Christian tradition maintains the symbol of peace, the sign of the oil- lamp that perpetually burns besides the Blessed Sacrament, . The olive branch is also different icon saints, from St. Bernard Tolomei, founder of the Olivetani at St. Irene and St. Bruno.

Olive oil ... makes history – the legendary olive tree and the oil extracted from its fruits have accompanied the history of mankind. 8000 years ago, the olive tree was

already cultivated in the Middle East and they were probably first cultivated in Syria and Crete. The Phoenicians spread this further cultivation on the coasts of the Mediterranean, Africa and South Europe. With the Greeks the cultivations of olive trees became more numerous, but it was the Romans who tried to cultivate these fruits in each invaded territory (in some cases ignoring the existing crops in southern Italy).

In many cases the Romans ordered their conquered peoples to pay tribute in the form of olive oil. Still, the Romans managed to build the first tools for pressing olives and increasingly perfecting techniques to preserve oil.

From the beginning the olive tree and its fruits have been found in the history of man in the sacred rituals of every day life, because the oil was used not only to enrich food but also to make massages and cosmetics. In the Homeric poems the oil was used exclusively for the cleaning and hygiene.

The Romans classified the olive oil in five qualities: “oleum ex albis ulivis” coming from the pressing of green olives, “oleum viride” from olives harvested at a more advanced ripening stage, “oleum maturum” from ripe olives, “oleum caducum” from olives fallen to the ground and “oleum cibarium” from olives that had almost dried for the use as slaves.

Numerous tools for collecting and pressing of olives, unearthed by archaeologists in several excavations in the Mediterranean, and several passages of the Bible and the Quran show the historical importance of this fruit of the olive and the work of men.

Even at the dawn of the third millennium the olive oil is a product full of mysticism, and above all a key part of the famous Mediterranean diet, a fashion expert witnesses many aspects of its health benefits.